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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: ABKHAZ ELECTION CAMPAIGN HEATS UP

REF: A. TBILISI 1991
[1](#)B. TBILISI 1713

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Kent D. Logsdon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. UN team member Hailu Mamo, a long-time Abkhazia observer, believes Abkhaz de facto "president" Bagapsh now faces a tough battle for re-election. Given past elections in Abkhazia, it is possible that this could be a real contest. No single opposition candidate has emerged as a clear challenger, but Mamo thinks many voters might lodge a protest vote against Bagapsh, preventing a majority winner and forcing a runoff. The three leading opposition candidates have reached an agreement to unite behind the leading contender in case of a runoff, so if Bagapsh fails to clear a majority in the first round, he could well lose. Bagapsh has reportedly made special appeals to the ethnic Armenians in Abkhazia and ethnic Abkhaz in Moscow, which may be a sign of his increasing concern. Although any transition makes for a period of uncertainty, the "foreign policy" positions of all candidates are hard to distinguish; they all agree on the necessity of shoring up their "independence" and maintaining a close relationship with Russia. Whatever the result, Abkhazia will still be interested in engaging with the United States -- but not at the cost of its relationship with Russia. End summary and comment

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: A MOMENTUM SHIFT

[1](#)2. (C) Hailu Mamo, one of the UN's three-person roving team for Georgia, served as UNOMIG's political advisor in Sukhumi for six years. Although the three members of the team are supposed to divide their time in Sukhumi and Tbilisi equally, Mamo has so far been spending more time in Sukhumi than the other two, because of his extensive contacts there. He arrived in Tbilisi November 27 after his most recent week in Sukhumi, and we spoke with him the next day.

[1](#)3. (C) Until recently Mamo felt that Bagapsh would likely be re-elected, not so much because he enjoyed strong support, but because none of the four opposition candidates did. Having no strong feelings about any of the candidates, the electorate would therefore be inclined to support the incumbent in order to avoid disruption. Bagapsh also did enjoy some halo effect from Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence and additional steps to support Abkhazia's security, which occurred under Bagapsh.

[1](#)4. (C) During his recent visit, however, Mamo sensed a very different mood, one of opposition to Bagapsh. He said many people were now planning to vote for opposition candidates, not because they have managed to attract significant support, but because people have become disenchanted with Bagapsh. A desire for change seems to be shifting the momentum from inertial support for the incumbent to protest support for

some alternative to Bagapsh. (An opposition leader, Astamur Tania, was recently quoted in the Abkhaz press criticizing another opposition leader for supporting Bagapsh because "his personal position contradicts the position of the entire opposition, which is directed toward bringing new people to power in the country.")

15. (C) Mamo noted that a recent agreement among the three foremost opposition candidates -- Beslan Butba, Raul Khajimba, and Zaur Ardinba -- to unite in the case of a runoff made this trend especially significant. Because a candidate must win a clear majority, any significant protest vote -- even one split among several opposition candidates -- could make it difficult for Bagapsh to win in the first round. Then, if the opposition candidates do in fact unite behind their own frontrunner in the runoff, they might have enough support to defeat Bagapsh. Mamo thought that Bagapsh's best hope was to win in the first round, and that he would more than likely lose in a second round. He also heard that many no longer believe that Bagapsh can win, and they may be suspicious of -- and even refuse to accept -- a Bagapsh victory, especially in a runoff.

THE BEEF WITH BAGAPSH

16. (C) Mamo said the disenchantment with the incumbent had been gradually accumulating over several months and stemmed from several missteps. One was the "president's" abortive effort to extend full Abkhaz "citizenship" to Gali residents, which was perceived as a blatantly political move based on Bagapsh's perceived self-interest and as a potentially existential threat to Abkhazia (ref B). Another was the

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recent arrest of Butba's brother, which was perceived to be politically motivated. Perhaps most importantly, Bagapsh is not perceived to have made any progress against corruption, which he had promised to do during his 2004 campaign; corruption is widely acknowledged to be a serious problem in Abkhazia and persists as a frequent campaign topic.

17. (C) Bagapsh has also recently taken steps to recruit support among the ethnic Armenian population of Abkhazia. (On November 23, for example, a campaign advertisement for Bagapsh reportedly aired, featuring prominent members of the Armenian community expressing their "unanimous" support for Bagapsh.) In addition, Mamo reported that Bagapsh recently traveled to Moscow to lobby for Abkhaz votes there; a representative of an international organization recently told us that the de facto authorities are exploring the possibility of opening polls in Moscow. Whether Bagapsh took these measures in response to a perception of a more competitive election or simply as a way to ensure victory, Mamo thinks they have backfired. The recruitment of Armenian support has led some Abkhaz to be concerned that such actions will encourage inter-ethnic rivalry within Abkhazia -- a particularly sensitive issue there. According to local Abkhaz law, a resident must have an Abkhaz "passport" to vote in Abkhaz elections; Bagapsh's campaigning in Moscow therefore raised concerns that he would manipulate the vote there, either by allowing improperly documented individuals to vote, or by outright falsification of the numbers.

18. (C) Bagapsh has also been criticized for giving the Russians too much influence, on both the political and especially the economic level. Even Khajimba, who was considered the pro-Russian candidate in 2004, complained in the press that an advertisement for Bagapsh included "a series of citizens of a foreign state" (i.e., Russia) agitating on behalf of Bagapsh's candidacy, thereby violating an Abkhaz law prohibiting foreign involvement in campaigns.

COMMENT: A TEMPEST IN A TEAPOT?

19. (C) These recent developments, as described by Mamo,

certainly make for a more interesting election season in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, all candidates agree on the importance of a strong stand on "sovereignty" and a strong relationship with Russia. A first-round, or even a second-round, defeat for Bagapsh -- though it will lead to a period of transition -- will ultimately be unlikely to change Abkhazia's basic approach to the outside world. It will still be interested in engagement with us -- but not at the cost of endangering its dependence on Russia. Divisive appeals to ethnic group politics could mean trouble, but at this point Bagapsh's moves do not seem to be going very far down that path -- only enough to give his opponents more possible points of attack.

LOGSDON